

Court camera returns as Spector's potential spectacle begins

by Matt Krasnowski

LOS ANGELES - A televised celebrity murder trial seemed unlikely to ever happen again after the infamous O.J. Simpson trial, which left lasting scars on the judge, the lawyers, the media and even the legal system.

But 12 years later, a judge just down the hallway from the Simpson trial courtroom has agreed to allow live television coverage of rock 'n' roll producer Phil Spector's murder trial in connection with the 2003 shooting death of actress Lana Clarkson.

The trial is scheduled to begin Monday with the first phase of jury selection, which will be conducted off camera. But when testimony starts - perhaps as early as next month - two remote-controlled video cameras will provide a live feed to television outlets.

Superior Court Judge Larry Paul Fidler said in a hearing last month that critics should get over their Simpson/camera hangover.

"We have to get by that case," Fidler said. "There's going to come a time that it will be commonplace to televise trials. If it had not been for Simpson, we'd be there now."

But even some legal observers who have supported court cameras wonder if the Spector trial is the wrong case to televise, given the combination of the flamboyant defendant and his outspoken lawyer.

Some are concerned that by bringing back the camera, Fidler could turn a trial that would likely be a camera-free curiosity into another TV spectacle - and set back television access to courthouses again.

"This is not the case to re-introduce the camera to the courtroom," said Jean Rosenbluth, a law professor at the University of Southern California and a former federal prosecutor.

Other legal analysts believe Fidler's decision was needed.

"My hope is that this case will put to rest the notion that you can't have a high-profile trial televised and have it conducted in the same way as any other trial," said lawyer Kelli Sager, who has represented numerous media organizations, including Copley News Service.

When the cameras roll, viewers will hear recounted the story of Clarkson, a 40-year-old actress who appeared in many TV shows and a number of low-budget movies such as "Deathstalker." As with many actors on the fringes of Hollywood, she was hoping to jump-start her career.

She reportedly met Spector, 66, hours before her death while working as a hostess at the House of Blues nightclub in West Hollywood.

Many music critics say Spector forever changed pop music with his "Wall of Sound" recordings in the 1960s, including the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Loving Feeling." When Clarkson met him, his glory days were far behind him.

At some point in the early morning hours of Feb. 3, 2003, she accompanied Spector back to his castle-like mansion in a less-than-glamorous section of the Los Angeles suburb of Alhambra.

Police found her dead in Spector's foyer with a single gunshot wound to her mouth. Spector was arrested and later released on \$1 million bail.

In September 2004, he was indicted on a single murder count. He faces life in prison.

Prosecutors are expected to rely heavily on the accounts of Spector's driver and a police officer. Both say Spector admitted killing Clarkson.

The government has also been allowed to call four women who contend Spector previously threatened them with guns. Spector's defense lawyers will argue that Clarkson shot herself.

"Everything that we've found is consistent with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the mouth," said Spector's lawyer, Bruce Cutler. Prosecutors "are trying to prove something beyond a reasonable doubt that they simply can't prove."

"We've charged murder and we do not believe it was a self-inflicted wound," responded Sandi Gibbons, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office.

Prosecutors did not oppose the inclusion of court cameras, but the defense wanted to keep them out.

"It invades the solemnity of the proceedings," Cutler said.

Still, Rosenbluth, the USC law professor, questions whether Cutler - a New York lawyer who represented the late organized crime boss John Gotti - will play to a television audience.

"I've seen Bruce Cutler argue - when he's supposed to be addressing the judge - pivot and start talking to reporters" in the gallery, she said. "He's a larger-than-life showman."

Cutler said that he is typically too caught up in the dynamics of the courtroom to think about the presence of TV cameras.

In any case, some observers also wonder if Spector's antics might get out of hand.

While he has been subdued in recent court appearances, in an early hearing it appeared that he made an obscene gesture toward a prosecutor. He likened prosecutors to fascists after he was indicted. Also, his changing hairdos and unique outfits have proved to be eye-catching on camera.

Thomas Mesereau, who successfully defended pop music icon Michael Jackson on child molestation charges in an untelevised trial, said he thinks the TV coverage - and the studio analysis that comes during recesses - could spur the judge to be harder on the defense.

"Many of these so-called legal analysts are complete mediocrities," Mesereau said. "I would not want a judge or witnesses to be affected by their ridiculous viewpoints."

In approving the televised coverage, Fidler said he will quickly boot the cameras if he believes the proceedings are getting out of hand. He acknowledged that he is in the minority among judges when it comes to allowing cameras, but said the broadcasts will show the way courts actually operate.

"I want to teach people how it works," he said. "I think we have the best criminal justice system in the world

in California."

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